

She slipped on the rocks- skidding, sliding, laughing in quick bursts. The daylight waned, casting swords of orange and pink-tinged light through her hair. It crashed into the wet rock, sending shards of glitter cascading through the rushing water, spilling over to stain the overgrown grasses and light aflame the nearly-empty vodka bottle she had carelessly tossed aside.

And I smiled. Though it made my face hurt, I always smiled around her. Who knows if she noticed; she never really looked at me. But it was my hope that one day- perhaps that day- her eyes would meet mine and I would find in them a reason for my existence here.

I was eight. Skinny with knobby knees and elbows, my hair always hung in clumps that obscured my eyes. I hated it because she called it dishwater, and anything that shared the likeness of the gray mess that swirled down the drain could never be considered pretty. Nor could the dull brown eyes that- to me- resembled dried mud. But they were mine, and mine alone; for everything about her was different.

Even in the pits of hell, when her head rested against the toilet bowl and her legs spread like useless tentacles across the linoleum, her skin still glowed pink. Her hair, red as a flame with curls that stuck out in all directions, was shiny. It was only her eyes that spoke truth. Though they too shone, it was not with exuberance of a fulfilled life, but another bottle gone... another night of desolate emptiness.

That day, memories of her sprawled across the bathroom were set aside for a rare glimpse of almost-forgotten frivolity. Her laugh was foreign, but not unwelcome. Somehow, it hurt less to smile at her. Perhaps the river gave her strength enough to grasp onto happiness for a moment. Perhaps it would redeem her.

She slipped again, cursing when she fell. But she remained sitting with her back to me, drawing her knees under her chin and sighing as she watched the water rush around her. She was remembering again. I could tell because I felt her pull- a thousand black hands that clung to me, tugging me toward her, rendering me helpless. I thought to call out to her, but I knew she wouldn't hear. She never did. But then she sighed again and stood, pulling me along behind her.

She walked, steadily this time, to the spot where the waters eddied, deepening into a pool that was far too dangerous for any child. The sound of it rose to envelop us both, in a memory as overplayed as the sunset that claimed the land day after day- the memory of the last time she truly looked into my eyes. Fear was evident on her face then, and I knew it would be now. Fear and stagnation, self pity and anger. She wore it as a second skin visible only to me, for her friends has long since stopped asking and she had mastered the art of masking pain with vodka.

It didn't matter now that she was alone with it. She could cry without restraint, and I could watch on as I always did... wanting to touch her, knowing I couldn't.

Her shoulders shook, sending shivers through her hair. Over the water, I heard her breathing. It surprised me, as the roar of the river was almost deafening. I suppose anguish outweighs Mother Nature, in that way. Nature tends to listen, where pain screams.

"I'm sorry." The words were soft and melodic, shocking me to the core. I strained to hear more, but if she spoke, it was swallowed by white noise. Still, I felt rooted and cold, unable to move. Was she speaking to me? Two years had come and gone since the last time, so what had changed now? Then she turned, her eyes shining through the last of the daylight- at me.

"I am so sorry." Her eyes were shining again, and the shininess cascaded down her face in a stream of regret. She stepped toward me, her hand outstretched. "Baby, come here."

"Mom?" I could do no more than to stand and gape, wondering why. Why now? The dead do not speak, and the living do not apologize. So why now did she look at me in total clarity? Why now, standing in the spot where I lost my life, where she had stood a hundred times since, did she look at me as though I were really here?

Tentatively, my hand rose to hers. Bittersweet warmth permeated the space between us, and when we touched, I felt it pour inside of me. Life, breath, a sense of crystal awareness; these are the things that leave us when we die. These are the things she gave me with her hand, for one fleeting second. And I cried a million tears in that second- for I knew it was all that I had- to prove to her that I was sorry too.

She sucked in a breath, the last I would hear from her, and wiped at the tears on her face. Then she cut through the waters, stronger than I could have ever hoped to be. Sodden, she walked along the bank, stopping to kick the bottle into the river. But I didn't follow.

Redemption comes only when you chose to forgive yourself. To do that, you must first confront what haunts you. With the last of the world fading from me- or me from it, I hoped that was what she had found.